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Dr. Catherine V. Addor

**Beyond the Building:
Formulating 100%**

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Beyond the Building: Formulating 100%

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“Students spend about 2% of their lifetime in school. The other 98% holds the key to engagement, relevance, and shared responsibility for learning.”

The Myth of the 100% School Day

For generations, our educational systems have been shaped by an illusion: that schools are where students spend the majority of their time and where the majority of their learning takes place. The truth is both more sobering and more liberating: children spend only about 2% of their lives inside school buildings. The remaining 98% unfolds elsewhere; at home, in neighborhoods, in community centers, and increasingly, in digital spaces.

Understanding this fact has radical implications for how we engage families and communities. If we continue to frame student success around what happens solely within the school walls, we are designing solutions for just a sliver of a child's life. If we choose to widen our lens and include the complete 100% of a child's ecosystem, we open up possibilities for support, growth, and a sense of belonging.

This article builds on research from a narrative inquiry on family engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, combines the 2% concept with fresh thinking about community partnerships, and offers a call to action for educational leaders to frame engagement as an ecological, whole-child endeavor.

Family Involvement Was Never Engagement

For decades, "parent involvement" has been associated with school-centric activities, including attending back-to-school nights, assisting with homework, and participating in parent-teacher conferences. During the COVID-19 pandemic, that model collapsed. Families were thrust into roles as co-teachers, tech support, emotional anchors, and curriculum designers.

Through in-depth interviews with parents and caregivers during this time, a clear shift emerged: from involvement (reacting to what schools ask) to engagement (actively shaping and supporting a child's learning life). Parents created routines, set up learning spaces, navigated IEP meetings, and found their support networks outside the school system. Engagement was contextual, creative, and deeply personal.



This shift must not be lost in the "return to normal." It is a blueprint for the future. As the American Institutes for Research (2023) notes, "Returning to pre-pandemic practices risks missing an opportunity to transform how schools partner with families." Schools that want to strengthen student outcomes must see families as engaged partners, not peripheral supporters.

"Engagement is relational, not transactional. It grows in the spaces between formal school activities; in how we communicate, invite, listen, and co-create."

The 2% Reality And Why It Matters

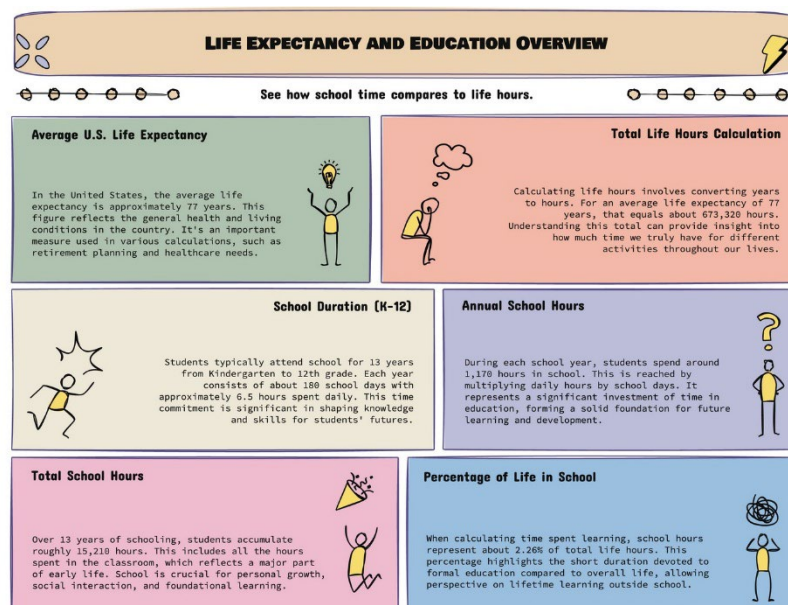
When you zoom out to consider a human lifespan, the time students spend in school is minimal, accounting for approximately 2% of their lives. That means 98% of their lives will unfold beyond the classroom: in homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities. Our systems often operate as if that narrow window of formal education is the whole story. Education isn't the destination; it's the preparation. It's how we equip students to navigate, contribute to, and thrive in the 98% of life that follows. We must shift our perspective: school is not the center of a student's life, but a catalyst for the rest of it.

This does not diminish the importance of the 2%. School plays a vital role in a young person's life. It offers structure, access to academic content, exposure to diverse perspectives, and a foundation for critical thinking. It provides consistent adult relationships, opportunities for identity development, and ideally, a safe environment where students are seen, supported, and challenged. The impact of that time can be profound.

We must be clear-eyed about its limitations. The other 98% of a child's life is where values are practiced, habits are formed, identities take shape, and real-world learning is reinforced or disrupted. It is in those hours (at home, in neighborhoods, in faith communities, online spaces, and social networks) that students navigate the complexities of daily life. They observe how adults respond to stress, how families prioritize time, how language is used, and how culture is lived.

When school systems are designed only for the hours we manage, we risk preparing students to succeed in classrooms, rather than in life. Leadership today must be rooted in the understanding that education is not confined to a single building or set of standards. Our systems must be intentionally designed to reflect, respect, and respond to the entirety of a child's lived experience. That means elevating partnerships with families, connecting learning to students' real lives, and designing structures that support development beyond the school day. Whole-child education demands whole-community thinking.

“Stop optimizing only for classroom hours. Start designing ecosystems of learning that reach into homes, communities, and digital spaces.”



[Click to enlarge](#)

Shifting the Frame: Families as Co-Educators

The old model of engagement is performative. It checks boxes. It relies on events, forms, and attendance sheets. Engagement is often treated as a task to complete (a bake sale here, a curriculum night there), with little consideration of whether these experiences build trust, deepen understanding, or meet families where they are. Families are asked to attend school activities on the school's terms, at the school's convenience, as designed by the school. In this model, communication tends to be one-way: information is pushed out, but little is taken in.



The model that creates lasting impact is reciprocal, flexible, and rooted in relationships. Families are not add-ons to the educational process; they are co-educators whose insight, presence, and experience directly influence student success. This approach is grounded in curiosity, humility, and shared purpose. It invites more profound questions:

- What do families know about their children that educators need to understand?
- How are we designing engagement strategies that honor the realities of caregivers' lives, whether they are balancing work schedules, speaking multiple languages, supporting family transitions, or navigating complex challenges?
- What strengths, knowledge, and lived experiences already exist in our community, and how are we actively inviting them into the life of the school in ways that are visible, valued, and sustained?

During the pandemic, schools were called to return to the core of what meaningful engagement looks like. In the absence of traditional structures, many rediscovered more authentic and responsive ways to connect with families. What emerged wasn't new; it was a return to relationship-driven practices rooted in empathy, flexibility, and trust. The most impactful strategies didn't come from mandates, but from the creativity and compassion of educators who understood that connection comes first:

- Teachers recorded short videos in multiple languages rather than relying on written newsletters filled with educational jargon.
- Schools hosted virtual office hours outside the typical 9-to-5 window, opening up space for working caregivers to ask questions and feel heard.
- Instead of treating families as passive recipients, many leaders opened decision-making spaces, inviting parents into advisory councils, planning sessions, and feedback loops.

The shifts weren't temporary crisis responses. They were glimpses into what an authentic, equity-centered partnership can look like when school systems are willing to listen, adapt, and share power. They offered a mirror to our assumptions and a map toward something more enduring.



These moments revealed something powerful: when families are treated as thought partners and not spectators, engagement becomes a culture. A culture where trust is mutual, communication flows in both directions, and the expertise of families is recognized as essential to student success.

Sustaining that culture requires more than good intentions. It calls for deliberate systems, policies, and leadership practices that reinforce partnership at every level, from the classroom to the district office. It means designing with families, not around them. It means valuing lived experience as much as credentials. It means understanding that engagement is not a one-time effort; it is an ongoing relationship built over time, grounded in respect, responsiveness, and shared purpose. This is the work that endures beyond any crisis. This is the work that transforms schools.

Leadership Action Step

Conduct a comprehensive audit of your school or district's family engagement practices using the [Family Feedback Reflection Tool](#). This is not about compliance, it's about clarity. Take a hard, honest look at who your current systems serve well, and who may be left at the margins.



Reflect on the following:

Who is consistently included and who isn't?

Look beyond event attendance and consider who is invited into meaningful conversations and decision-making spaces.

Which families feel empowered to speak and which feel like they must stay silent?

Examine language access, cultural responsiveness, and the interpersonal dynamics that shape who feels safe and welcome to contribute.

How often do families shape the agenda, not simply respond to it?

Engagement should not be reactive or event-driven. Are there formal structures that invite family voice into school improvement efforts, curriculum design, or student wellness planning?

Are your practices reflective of your whole community, not just the most visible or vocal parts?

Analyze whose stories are told, whose values are centered, and whose assets are leveraged.



Take a moment to reflect on whether your engagement strategies genuinely embody the principles of inclusion, reciprocity, and trust. Go beyond counting attendance and consider the quality of the experiences you're offering. Are there multiple, culturally responsive entry points for families to engage, not just in school events, but in the life of the school as a whole? Are your systems designed with flexibility, so that caregivers with varied schedules, languages, and responsibilities can still participate meaningfully? Examine how feedback is gathered, how decisions are communicated, and whether families see their input reflected in the school's subsequent actions. Engagement with impact is defined by how families feel when they are seen, valued, and heard.

Genuine engagement grows from shared ownership and mutual respect. The goal isn't to increase participation for its own sake, but to reshape systems so that families are collaborators in shaping what school can be. As a leader, your responsibility is to create structures that reflect the lived realities of your students and their families, structures that invite contributions, acknowledge expertise, and affirm a sense of belonging. Structures that can sustain generations of students. Let your audit be more than an exercise; let it be a catalyst for building a culture where every family sees themselves as a vital part of the school's purpose and progress.

Engagement Evolved: A Vision for Deep Community Partnership

Much like family engagement, community engagement has often been symbolic in nature. A business sponsors the science fair. A nonprofit provides backpacks in September. A local official speaks at graduation. These gestures matter, but transactional partnerships don't build ecosystems. They don't sustain students. They fail to create a connection between what is taught in

school and what is experienced in daily life. They don't reflect the full potential of what a community can offer when it is actively integrated.

To move toward something more meaningful, we must reframe the purpose of community engagement entirely. The goal is not visibility. It's alignment.

Imagine a model of engagement that:

- Moves beyond the glossy language of the Portrait of a Graduate to focus on the real-world knowledge, skills, and experiences students need to navigate the lives they're living, not the ones we imagine for them.
- Taps into the expertise and presence of community members as mentors, coaches, storytellers, and role models, helping students build identity and agency through authentic connections.
- Integrates local history, culture, geography, and industries into the curriculum so that learning feels rooted, relevant, and responsive to where students live and who they are becoming.

The shift begins when we stop viewing community partners as external. They are not guests in this work. They are co-authors of the learning journey. They are already shaping the 98%. Our responsibility is to acknowledge, honor, and engage that influence within the school's design. Community is not a stakeholder group to consult. It is part of the child's 100%.



Add-on Innovation Services **Ecosystem Mapping Tool for Ed Leaders**



Leadership Action Step:

Use the [Ecosystem Mapping Tool for Education Leaders](#) to map out your school or district. Include families, local leaders, faith-based institutions, libraries, arts organizations, healthcare providers, cultural centers, youth programs, and businesses. Identify the relationships that already exist. Where are the strong ties? Then ask: Where are the missed opportunities? Where do gaps exist between what students need and what your broader community could provide?

Use this map as more than a directory. Let it become a living blueprint for partnership; one that positions community as a vital thread in the fabric of learning.



Leadership Tools for Relevance and Connection

Reimagining engagement isn't a theoretical exercise; it's a leadership responsibility. If we want to build schools that reflect the whole lives our students are living, we need tools that help us pause, assess, and redesign with intention. These three practices are designed to bring the 100% mindset into daily leadership work. They are ways of seeing, questioning, and reconnecting with purpose.

1. The 100% Pie Model

Start with a simple visual: a pie chart representing a child's life. Shade in the 2% of time they spend in school. Then gather your team and reflect:

- What's happening in the 98% we don't see?
- Who influences students outside of school?
- Where do we have meaningful connections, and where are we missing them?

This activity grounds your planning in reality. It's a reminder that the work doesn't end when the bell rings. It helps educators see the bigger picture and invites deeper conversations about the purpose of school.

2. Relevance Reflection for Curriculum

Relevance is a bridge. It connects the content we teach to the lives our students are living. Without it, learning stays on one side, abstract, disconnected, and easily forgotten. With it, students can cross into more profound understanding, personal meaning, and lasting engagement. Invite educators to ask: "Does this lesson connect to the world my students live in?"

Use that question to examine:

- Whether content reflects students' lived experiences and identities
- How local culture, current events, or student interests are represented
- Where there are opportunities for students to apply their learning in their real lives

This is about making learning matter. A curriculum that connects is a curriculum that sticks. Building the bridge means anchoring one side in curriculum goals and the other in students' lived experiences: their cultures, communities, languages, and questions about the world. The strongest bridges are designed with both ends in mind.

3. Family/Community Integration Planner

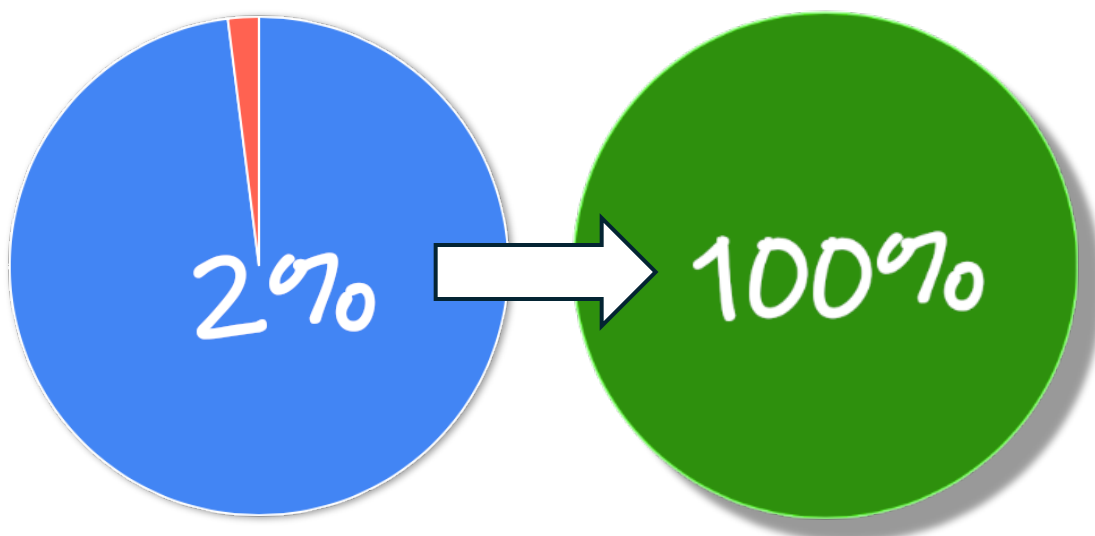
For every unit, event, or initiative, bring a new lens: How can we build this with (not just for) our families and community?

Consider:

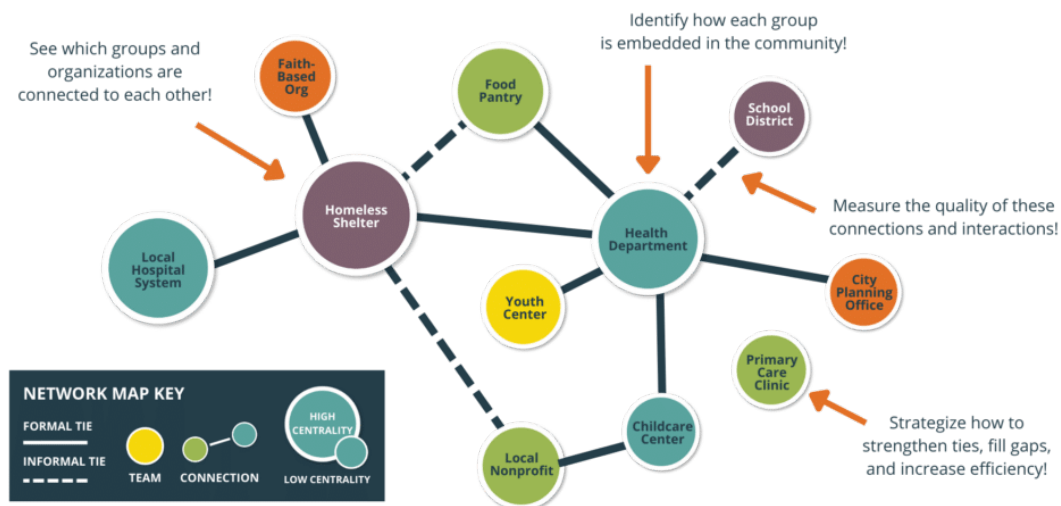
- Is there a role for families to contribute meaningfully?
- Could a local organization, business, or cultural group help deepen or contextualize the learning?
- Are we effectively communicating the purpose and value of this work to all families?

This practice ensures that engagement isn't an afterthought or add-on. It becomes part of the design process. When schools plan with families and communities in mind from the outset, the result is a more inclusive, relevant, and lasting experience.

These tools are starting points. They will help reframe how we approach leadership, learning, and connection. **Relevance is more than a strategy. It's a commitment to honoring the full story of every child.**



MAPPING A COMMUNITY ECOSYSTEM



Questions for Leadership Teams

Reflection must come before change. Reflection challenges assumptions, uncovers blind spots, and supports the design of school systems that reflect the whole lives of students, families, and communities. The following questions are designed to guide deeper conversations among leadership teams, instructional coaches, and decision-makers. Use them to pause and align your practices with a 100% mindset, one that honors the complete ecosystem of each student.

- Are we building systems that reflect a child's whole experience, or are we still designing for the 2% we directly manage?
- In what ways do our schedules, policies, and curriculum invite families and communities in, and where might they unintentionally keep them out?
- What underlying beliefs shape our definition of family engagement, and how might they be limited by bias or tradition?
- How are we ensuring that our engagement practices reflect the full diversity of the families we serve, or are they navigating systems not built with them in mind?
- How are we building trust with families before asking for participation or input, and what signals are we sending about whose voices matter?

These questions won't lead to easy answers, but they can open the door to real, lasting change. The goal is perspective. When we lead with curiosity and humility, we create space for schools that serve the 100%.

A Call to Educational Leaders

Transformational outcomes begin with transformational engagement. That kind of change doesn't come from checklists or convenience.

This is about starting with intention.

- Create space for listening, not information delivery.
- Co-design your calendar and events *with* families, not *for* them.
- Invite caregivers into the rooms where decisions are made, making sure their voices carry weight.
- Bring the culture, language, and wisdom of your community into the curriculum, where students can see themselves reflected and respected.

The 2% of time we share with students matters. It shapes, challenges, and supports their growth. It will never be the whole story.



Leadership today means understanding that our responsibility isn't limited to the time inside the building. Our role is to steward the connection between the time we have and the world our students live in. To build bridges between school and life. To honor the expertise of families. To treat engagement as the connective tissue that holds meaningful education together.

When we lead for the 100% we're standing in service of who our students are, where they come from, and who they are becoming.

Engagement Is an Ecosystem

No child grows in isolation. No educator teaches in isolation. No school thrives in isolation. Learning is not confined to a classroom, nor is it sustained solely by the curriculum. It's shaped by relationships, rooted in lived experience, and nurtured through the ecosystems that surround every student.

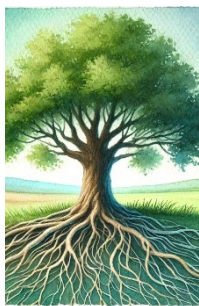
When we reframe engagement as the intentional weaving together of school, family, and community, we move beyond outreach and into partnership. We move closer to equity by beginning to recognize and respond to the different starting points and strengths each family brings. We move deeper into relevance because we acknowledge that students live whole lives outside the classroom, and those lives hold knowledge worth honoring. We move closer to the reality of who our students are, not who we assume them to be, nor how we label them.

This shift requires us to stop asking families and communities to adapt to systems that evolved away from having them in mind. We must commit to redesigning those systems (structures, schedules, expectations, and definitions of success) to reflect and respond to the diverse realities of the people we serve.

That is what leadership for the 100% looks like. It's about seeing more, listening more, and partnering differently. It's about having the courage to build schools that truly belong to the communities they serve.

References

American Institutes for Research. (2023, December). [Creating the conditions for meaningful family engagement: A resource for education leaders.](#)



Dr. Catherine V. Addor is the founder of [Addor-ation Innovation Services](#), dedicated to advancing curriculum development, instructional excellence, and professional learning for educators. She earned her doctorate from [Manhattanville University](#), examining parent and caregiver engagement in K-12 education during extreme crises, utilizing qualitative narrative inquiry framed by Urie Bronfenbrenner's [Ecological Systems Theory](#).  